

Profile: Donnella De Silva



Hometown:

Auckland

Program:

Volunteer Peru

Total length of time spent overseas / or intended length of travel:

4 months - 3 months of work and 1 month of travel.

Tell us where you lived and what you got up to in Peru?

I lived in Cusco, a city in the far west of Peru, near Machu Picchu. I worked in an orphanage and a kindergarten there each day for three months. I was lucky enough to be put in a home-stay accommodation near both of my jobs, so I was able to walk to work each day.

At the kindergarten, where I worked in the morning, I was working with the oldest children, and that work was mainly supervision, as they would play and draw by themselves or with their peers most of the time. There was a lot of stopping fights as well! The kindergarten was a small apartment, so at times it was difficult as the children did not have a lot of space to play and there was a wide range of ages - from babies to 6 year olds, which caused problems at times. I enjoyed the work there though and the workers, especially the director and manager were fantastic, and very welcoming to the volunteers.

At the orphanage it was very different. There were far more children (all girls) and less workers - generally about three or four women (not counting the volunteers) for about 45 children. I loved my time at the orphanage however, as the children were very inclusive and friendly. It was not hard to find something to do, and the children would pull you into their games and homework, and if you had enough Spanish chat with you too. I got to be quite close to some of the girls, which was great.

I was at a boy's orphanage for the first month and I then switched to the kindergarten, before taking a month off to travel with two other volunteers. In that month we did a trek to Machu Picchu through the jungle, visited the Nazca Lines, Lima, and four other of the southern cities, and had some amazing experiences. For my last month I returned to work at the kindergarten and orphanage, and was very glad to get back to Cusco and work. I loved my jobs and will certainly visit both places next time I go to Peru.

What are some of the experiences that you had which made an impact on you?

In the orphanage I was working with children who, the majority of the time, had at least one parent dead (most of the children weren't orphans, but came from families too poor to support them), and the hardship that they had gone through definitely impacted on me, especially as I had a great childhood, and it was a bit of a shock to see children who were in or had been in such awful situations. A lot of their stories had an affect on me, as did hearing about the family situations of the children at the kindergarten from my director. I wouldn't say that there were a few experiences that had an impact on me, but working everyday with the children and hearing their stories over the course of three months certainly did.



WORKING ADVENTURES WORLDWIDE

Were there any hard times?

My first month was quite hard, especially the first couple of weeks, but I very quickly started having the time of my life! I didn't have culture shock at all, though I did get quite homesick at times. Leaving was the hardest!

What is something unexpected/different/strange about Peru compared with other places you have lived?

I wasn't expecting the city of Cusco to be as touristy as it was, but as it is situated near Machu Picchu, it is the main tourist city of Peru, and that is very obvious on arrival. I sometimes got a bit annoyed at the tourist influence on the city, because being obviously foreign I was constantly being treated as a tourist, even though I lived there.

Do you have any advice for someone who wants a Peruvian adventure?

To do a lot of research! While travelling we would see a lot of foreigners getting totally scammed because they weren't aware of how much they should really be paying. The Lonely Planet Guide certainly helped, as did talking to a lot of other volunteers and travelers.

Also learn the language, I didn't take classes but I would recommend it, as being able to communicate well gives you so many more opportunities and much more independence. The Peruvians appreciate and respect people more if they have made an effort to communicate in their language first, although a lot of people in Cusco especially can and do speak English to foreigners as well.

What did you find valuable in going to Peru on an IEP program?

The Lonely Plane guide certainly helped, but the thing I appreciated most about the program was my home-stay. I was within walking distance to both my jobs, and my home-stay mother was all I could have wished for. I had a minor health problem during my first month and it was a relief to be able to talk to my INTEJ program coordinator about it, and she immediately took me to the chemist to deal with it, which I greatly appreciated!

What next for you?

I am now working in retail until February, when I will start University studying Sociology, Spanish (both influenced by going to Peru), and Psychology. I will hopefully be doing some volunteer work through Youthline as well.

